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MASIA OF THE ALT EMPORDÀ REGION

THE CATALAN FARMHOUSE

MANY PEOPLE WHO LEAD A CITY LIFE DO NOT FORGET THAT THEIR ANCESTORS CAME FROM A PEASANT FAMILY WHO RAN A FARM, OR ELSE FROM A FARMING HOUSEHOLD RELATED TO THE AGRICULTURAL ECONOMY AND FORMING PART OF A CONCENTRATED NUCLEUS OF POPULATION.

MARC-AURELI VILA GEOGRAPHER



MASIA OF THE RIPOLLÈS REGION

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Catalonia is a land of natural regions; and according to the region, the farm is given the name of *mas* or *masia*. Everything seems to indicate that the word *mas* is the older of the two and that it comes from the Latin *mansus*. As used by the Romans, the term indicated a place of abode, a permanent residence –in other words, an environment related with the settled life required for the work of the fields and the breeding of animals. At all events, it referred to a unit of economic exploitation of a marked agricultural character, consisting of land for agricul-

tural production and a dwelling complemented by a variety of buildings related to the activities of the exploitation: crops, breeding, farmyard animals, production of such things as bread, wine, oil, etc. Nowadays, the term *masia* is normally applied, especially in the wetter parts of Catalonia, to the dwelling which serves both as a family home and as the centre of the agrarian exploitation.

The concept both of *mas* and of *masia* involve the presence of a family nucleus and of a hired workforce in the service of the unit of exploitation. In Catalan

society, and as regards the aspect of family roots, ancestors related to a *mas* or *masia* have been and are of evident importance. Many people who lead a city life do not forget that their ancestors came from a peasant family who ran a farm, or else from a farming household related to the agricultural economy and forming part of a concentrated nucleus of population.

As regards physical geography, Catalonia is a land of notorious diversity, a land of contrasting geographical landscapes. The relief, the wind and the rainfall differ considerably from one place



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MASIA OF THE BAIX EMPORDÀ REGION

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to another over even short distances. If in general the climate of the lands of Catalonia can be qualified as Mediterranean, in regions like the Vall d'Aran it is quite evidently Atlantic, and in other, inland regions it is of a continental nature, as the maritime influence is weak.

These climatic factors, along with the plant cover and the rivers and underground water systems, as well as the geological constitution of the soil, which varies widely from one place to another, have had a very pronounced influence on the production economy in the rural environment.

Developments in agrarian economy arising as a result of the course of history have left their mark on rural constructions. Many of the features of the country's farmhouses provide testimonial evidence of the geographical conditioning factors, of the influence of technical developments and of the economic factors acting on the rural population.

This unwritten and unspoken testimony

can be clearly seen both in the exterior features of the buildings –facades, roofs, windows, balconies and doors, defensive works...– and in the distribution and the function –past or present– of the spaces making up each of the floors of the central building. These buildings can be extremely simple and consist of a single floor and the loft-space, or else impressively majestic, with ground floor, main floor and loft, or there are cases in which further constructions have been added to the central building.

Though the constructions adjacent to the principal dwelling can belong to the same period, we often find buildings that have been enlarged on one or more occasions over the years. These enlargements might have been necessary as a result of the growth of the family or an increase in the hired workforce or because of expansion in the economic activity. The study of the different covered spaces that go to make up the farmhouse as a body allow us to retrace –in the absence of documents or com-

plementing the written sources– the history of the people who, over a period of time that can sometimes add up to centuries, continued the human and therefore economic activity of a *mas* in production.

Political situations –whether conflictive or peaceful– or else a gradual or sudden decline in the basic economic activity of the agrarian unit of production have left their mark on farmhouse construction. The Catalan peasantry still remembers the destruction of the vineyards by phylloxera at the end of the nineteenth century, which in many cases altered the role of the spaces in the *masia*. In a very positive fashion, this role became evident in the inland regions of the Principality on the occasion of the opening of the Catalan ports to trade with the Americas in 1778.

Obviously, the construction of farmhouses and their annexes depended to a large extent, and sometimes almost entirely, on the building materials to be had in the neighbourhood. In the past, transporting building materials was dif-



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difficult and therefore time-consuming; the master builders and workmen had to make use of whatever materials they had close at hand, whether minerals—stone, clay, slate, lime, plaster, coloured earths, etc.—or the wood available in the vicinity for beams, windows, balconies, etc. The building material that was easiest to transport—due to the fact that only small quantities were used and it was supplied duly transformed according to the function it was destined to serve—was iron. Locks, keys, grills, hinges, etc. might come from forges situated at considerable distances. If there was plenty of broken stone on the site, of a size that was easy to handle, the walls were raised with some ease and with evident economy, so that the dressed stone worked by the stonemasons was reserved for the door and window frames.

Where stone was scarce, as is the case in several parts of the Central Depression, local clays were put to good use for producing bricks, roof-tiles and other articles made from dried and baked

clay. It is worth pointing out that clays abound in the geographical area of Catalonia, for which reason since remote times it has been possible to roof farmhouses—in one, two or four sections—with tiles, the same way as in the concentrated centres of population.

In the Pyrenees, slate—under the name *llicorella*—has traditionally been used to cover buildings. This is a foliated mineral which can be found *in situ*, is easy to work, and allows the snow to slide off and to melt more easily. Its considerable weight requires stout beams resting on thick stone walls. The beams came from woods high up in the mountains and there was no lack of stone for the walls.

The interior distribution of the *masia* helped to encourage the persistence of family feelings and values. Without a solid family unity arising from blood ties and in keeping with a family law that was powerfully conditioned by the imperative need to maintain the unit of economic exploitation generation after generation, the Catalan agricultural

system, which is as far removed from the offensive *latifundia* as it is from the wretched *minifundia*, would hardly have managed to survive.

The symbol and the tangible reality of family cohesion in terms of the farmhouse interior was the fireplace and the dining/living-room.

Many old farmhouses remain whose structure is extremely simple but ever faithful to the architectural development that made them functional. The magnificence of others tells us of the wealth of the unit of economic exploitation and the influence the owners could exert within the region and even outside it, both in social life and in political affairs.

In the nobler farmhouses, the large windows of the main facade were enriched with carved stonework, which served to proclaim the kind of life the inhabitants led.

Every farmhouse, whether rich or humble, had its *golfes*, or loft—that is, the large space under the roof which was used as a storeroom and to keep a range



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of products from the agricultural exploitation; products that had to be preserved from all harm, especially bearing in mind that they were for consumption during the winter, according to the needs both of the farm animals and of the farm's human inhabitants.

The location of the farmhouse was independent of any urban development, often even of the prior existence of a country lane, though consideration was given to the economic possibilities offered by particular areas. The bridle-paths that linked one farmhouse with another or with concentrated centres of population were gradually transformed into cart-tracks through the pressure deriving from the growth of agricultural exploitations.

The fact of not having to fit in with any kind of urban arrangement meant that builders could place their farmhouses, preferentially, in sunny spots, rather than in the shade of the mountains. Care was also taken that the principal facade should be orientated in such a way as to receive as many hours of sun-



light as possible during the winter months.

During the twentieth century, those farmhouses that stood close to a concentrated nucleus of population and amongst the vineyards, olive groves and market gardens that supplied the urban conglomerate have over the years been perceptibly enveloped by the towns and cities. While many of these farmhouses were demolished to leave room which was occupied by the new urban constructions, in a few cases they were preserved and can be seen forming part of the urban fabric. These buildings are legally protected against their possible disappearance. The contrast between the old rural dwellings and the constructions of modern city architecture surrounding them is an instructive one.

The *masos* and *masies* of the regions of Catalonia are disappearing in large numbers as a result of violent demolitions.

In the Catalan regions extending to the north of the Pyrenees—the Rosselló, Va-



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llespir, Conflent and the higher reaches of the Cerdanya— it is not at all easy to find the traditional Catalan *masia*. In the seventeenth century, in order to overcome the resistance of the rebellious Catalans, the French monarchy's forces decided to wipe the landscape clean of the classical farmhouse, the *masia*, as these favoured the actions of the Catalan patriots known as *angelets*. In the lands to the south of the Pyrenees, large-scale destruction of farmhouses also took place, during the War of the Reapers (1640-1652), at the hands of the Castilian monarchy's forces; and many more farmhouses disappeared during the War of Succession (1702-1714) by the action of the Franco-Spanish forces that invaded the country.

We frequently find on the lintel over the door of the farmhouse the year of its construction or restoration, along with the name of the relevant owner. The commonest dates are the years of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Sometimes the year and name appear



on the sundial that adorns the facade. In the south of the Principality we find farmhouses that are very different from the classical *masies*. These are buildings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which are a testimony, with their handsome appearance, of a period of growth deriving from the exporting of wine, liquor, oil and nuts.

For some time now, there has been a noticeable, growing tendency to restore a lot of the old Catalan farmhouses. Once restored they become second homes for people from the city or else are used as premises for services of an eminently social character. Lately, and without their owners leaving off their traditional economic activities, farmhouses are offered, suitably fitted up, in various of the country's inland regions, as places of rest and peace for a few guests and for a period of a few days or weeks. In many cases, all over Catalonia, farmhouses have been turned into restaurants—some of them were already used as roadhouses in ancient times—which are open all the year round. ■